



The Rancher's Unloved Wife

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Description: My gorgeous billionaire husband has never shown interest in me...until I made plans for divorce.

Everyone thinks I'm the luckiest girl on earth to be married to San Antonio's newest billionaire rancher Ryu Harcourt.

But they couldn't be any more wrong, and it's time I take back control of my life.

I asked my husband for a divorce, thinking he'd be thrilled to get rid of me.

Instead, Ryu turns my whole world upside-down by demanding my heart and body.

He wants me to fall in love with him...even when he has someone else.

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The Bride

YOUR MARRIAGE IS YOUR best cover-up story.

And your wife, your strongest witness.

But only if you marry the right woman.

The wise words of Ryu's mentor played in his mind as he studied the profile reports he had ordered from the matchmaking agency.

Hmm.

Only one girl caught his eye: twenty-year-old college student Summerine Chan, and it had everything to do with what she was not.

Zero job experience.

No particular achievement in academics or sports.

Parents frequently disparage their own daughter for not having a backbone.

Even better, his investigator managed to unearth evidence of George Chan's debts, which Ryu could then use as leverage to prevent his future in-laws from interfering in his marriage.

The life he wished to maintain required the utmost secrecy, which could only be

provided by the illusion of a perfect marriage.

Pretending to be a fairytale prince was something he was used to. But Ryu also knew that such a role could only go so far.

Sooner or later, people would start wondering and asking questions...unless of course, he chose to pre-empt this by giving everyone something new to talk about. And was there anything more entertaining than news of a billionaire falling in love with a girl society least expected to catch his attention?

Ryu reached for the profile report he had been studying for the last hour.

Summerine.

Her name matched her delicate features, but why did he have a feeling that she was not at all like everyone assumed her to be?

Now or Never

I'M SORRY TO DO THIS.

But I have to.

I'm twenty, not two.

I'm a full-fledged adult with a fully functioning brain, and I respectfully decline to marry just because you want me to.

The words sounded good in Summerine's mind, but the moment she faced the mirror and allowed herself to imagine saying the exact same words—

I can't.

Her courage dwindled into nothing in a nanosecond.

"I'm t-twenty, n-not t-two."

And it had her stammering like she often did when confronting her parents.

You have to say this,she reminded herself forcefully.

Because if you don't...

Bile rose from her stomach as she tried to envision the future her parents had cold-bloodedly arranged for her.

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Their arranged marriage might have worked for them, but...

You need to make a stand!

It's now or never!

So speak up!

Summerine she took a deep breath—

KNOCK, KNOCK.

But it was too late.

"I need you out." Her mother's tone was imperious.

Summerine contemplated never opening the door.

"I'll drag you by the hair if need be."

And since Annie had never been the type to make idle threats, Summerine reluctantly stepped out of the powder room and was immediately subjected to a frosty glare.

"Why must you always be so slow?"

Because you scare me to death.

The older woman's gaze raked over her from head to toe. "You'll do." Her mother swung away with a decisive snap of her Louboutins, and Summerine followed behind her mother even as a voice inside of her head started taunting her.

(Coward!)

Oh shut up, she mentally snapped back even though she knew talking to herself would only make things worse.

(Why do you even bother dreaming when you don't have the guts to make it come true?)

(Just accept it. You'll always be under their thumb.)

(And you'll be doing their bidding until the day you—)

Summerine shoved her Inner Troll into an imaginary closet and kicked the doors shut. The last thing she needed was a nonexistent entity pointlessly pointing out the obvious. She would be better off spending her last precious hours (minutes?) of freedom devising a way out—

Or not.

Summerine could feel her lungs working overtime at the sight of her father impatiently waiting for them in the living room.

Her father, who was supposed to be thousands of miles away.

Her father, who was even more terrifying than Annie.

Like, a lot.

"Stop that."

Summerine jumped involuntarily at her father's tone, and his glare had her unclenching her fists in a hurry. George thought the mannerism unladylike and unbecoming, and she had never had the courage to tell him that she never meant to do it deliberately.

It only happened when she was anxious, and unfortunately for all of them, there was nothing more anxiety-inducing for Summerine than being in the presence of her parents.

George surveyed their surroundings with satisfaction. "You've done a very good job, Annie."

Their entire home had recently been featured by a local morning show, and her parents' costly remodeling had garnered praise from its hosts.

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I've never seen 'ornate' done so tastefully!

The way they've woven red silk in every room is impressive!

And those Oriental lanterns, oh my!

To the whole of San Antonio, their penthouse apartment was a visual celebration of their Chinese-American heritage.

But to Summerine, it was nothing but her gilded prison.

And the only way to escape it...wasthat.

Everyone in the living room tensed at the sound of their front door opening and their butler showing their visitor in.

George suddenly gestured to Summerine. "Is it new?" he asked his wife under his breath.

"It's for an upcoming season. It hasn't even been released."

"Won't make a difference if he doesn't know that."

"Oh, he'll know," his wife said with confidence. "Once their engagement photos are released, the press won't be able to stop talking about it. This dress cost us many,manyfavors."

Summerine was used to her parents discussing her as if she wasn't there, mostly over their disappointment with the way she looked or didn't look. The way she talked or didn't talk. Et cetera, et cetera.

But what she wasn't used to at all was how business-like they sounded. It was as if all she was to them was an asset to sell to the highest bidder, and maybe...

Maybe that was the only reason they even had a child in the first place?

Their butler walked in, and Summerine's heart started pounding.

"Mr. Ryu Harcourt, sir."

She cast her gaze down without knowing why, and her world threatened to spiral as she listened to her parents welcome their visitor like he was a member of royalty.

What do I do?

It was one thing to disobey her parents for the first time in her life. But to do so in front of a stranger?

"And may I present to you our lovely daughter?"

Countless fears invaded her mind upon hearing George introduce her. She could only think of two types of men who would see nothing wrong with buying himself a bride.

A dirty old man with more money than morals.

Or—

A dirty young man, also with more money than morals.

"Summerine?"

She tried to lift her gaze, but the thought of spending the rest of her life had Summerine's throat closing up.

It almost...it almost seemed...as if she was about...to...faint.

Now or Never, Pt. 2.

I MEAN IT THIS TIME, Summerine swore as she made eye contact with her reflection. She was dressed in a bridal gown that its designer intended to launch in the upcoming Fashion Week in Paris. It was an intricate creation of silk and lace flowers, and it was just so wonderfully made that it even created a magnificent illusion of Summerine possessing a lovely semblance of cleavage.

But even so.

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What good would wearing a fairytale wedding gown do when she didn't even know a single thing about her bridegroom?

It was only three weeks ago that she had fainted at his feet, and Annie had thrown a glass of ice-cold water at Summerine's face to revive her.

"You could've ruined everything for us, you idiot," her mother had hissed.

"I—I—"

"You're lucky Mr. Harcourt is such a pragmatic man. He's already signed the contract. Wedding banns will be posted by tonight, and a notice of your engagement will be in tomorrow's papers."

And that was that.

Ryu Harcourt hadn't come back to their home since, and without any access to a mobile phone or the Internet, Summerine hadn't been able to contact him herself. The only recourse left to her was to muster the courage to stand up to her parents.

But each time she had attempted to speak, Summerine would find herself the object of their hard gazes, her courage would flee, and that was why...

It had to be now or never.

And so she lifted her chin and practiced looking serious in front of the mirror.

Because that was important, right?

She had to look serious to be taken seriously.

Right?

Summerine's heart started thudding as soon as she made herself imagine it was her parents standing in front of her.

Mother. Father. I want to speak to you.

Her knees quaked as she imagined the derision in her parents' gazes upon hearing this.

I mean it.

And I won't take no for an answer.

Rehearsing the words already had her stomach twisting itself in knots, but Summerine somehow found it in herself to press on.

You'll probably hate me for what I have to say, and I'm sorry for that.

You probably won't forgive me either, but I can no longer just do nothing.

I'm twenty, two. I'm a full-fledged adult with a fully functioning brain.

And so there is no way I will marry someone I haven't even—

Summerine forgot the rest of her speech when the door to the bridal suite suddenly opened.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Annie closed the door behind her, and Summerine's hands started to perspire when her mother turned to her.

"You're already three minutes late," her mother snapped. "Have we not taught you better?"

"I—I—"

Annie's gaze narrowed, and Summerine paled when she realized what her mother was staring at. She hurriedly unclenched her fists, but Annie's lips had already tightened in annoyance.

"Must you be so dramatic about this?"

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You're making me marry a total stranger, Summerine wished she could cry out. Was that something she was supposed to celebrate in their book?

"You wouldn't even have a chance of nabbing a man like Mr. Harcourt if not for us."

Then why don't you just nab him for yourself?

Summerine was dying to throw these words at her mother.

(But you can't, can you?)

"Your father thinks I don't have to bother talking to you one last time, but that look on your face clearly proves otherwise."

Now or never, she urged herself. Speak up or hold your silence for the rest of your life!

Summerine swallowed hard. "I—I—"

"Don't care to hear it," her mother cut her off in a cold voice. "And if there's anyone who's going to do some listening, that would be you."

Summerine shrank back as Annie took a threatening step forward.

"Your father and I need your wedding to Ryu Harcourt to push through, and we will not let anyone get in any way," her mother hissed. "Least of all you. Are we clear on this?"

No. We're not clear on this. At all.

I'm your daughter. You're my parents.

So why are you doing this to me?

I object.

I'M SORRY I HAVE TO do this in front of everyone.

But my parents left me no choice.

I can't marry you.

I'm so sorry.

Summerine repeated the words in her mind as she walked down the carpeted flower-lined ramp. Whoever it was that had been hired to be their venue stylist was a genius, with the entire ballroom transformed into a lantern-lit forest of glow-in-the-dark flowers.

Everyone was also staring at her like she was the most radiant bride—and not one of them seemed to notice the way her parents were guarding her every move like a warden that was ready to have her arrested at the slightest provocation.

I object. I object. I object.

Summerine refused to be intimidated and focused on practicing the first and most important words of her speech.

I object. I object. I object.

But as soon as she reached the end of the ramp, she felt like fainting anew as she sensed her bridegroom taking his place next to her.

I...I...I...

O...O...Oh, this was impossible!

"Before I join these two in holy matrimony, would anyone here care to step forward in objection?"

Half of her was determined to ignore his existence. But the other half of her had the inexplicable urge to steal a peek at the stranger her parents had arranged for her to marry.

"Very well, then..."

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On the day he had visited her home, Summerine had already fainted before she could see what he looked like, and he was long gone by the time she woke.

"We are gathered here today——"

Maybe...maybe she could just turn his way ever so slightly...and just have the tiniest look?

"To join Ryu Harcourt and Summerine Chan in marriage."

Yes, a tiny look wouldn't hurt at all. Right?

"Do you, Ryu, take Summerine to be your lawful spouse?"

Summerine turned ever so carefully towards him.

"Yes."

And then she ever so slowly lifted her gaze to his.

"Do you, Summerine, to be your lawful spouse?"

Oh. My. Gosh.

Was it not the craziest and cruelest of coincidences that she was a closetotaku for almost her entire life...while the man standing next to her happened to be the sizzingly perfect embodiment of what abishounen would've looked in reality?

The longer she stared at him, the more she felt as if she was sucked into the pages of her favorite josei manga, and she was now living the life she had always dreamed of.

His hair was a gleaming shade of black, his eyes dark and piercing.

And his face, oh, his face.

It was just so, so beautiful that only his chiseled jaw saved it from being too pretty.

And his height. And build. And—

"Summerine?"

So lost was she in the surreal perfection of his looks that she answered without thinking.

"Y-Yes?"

People suddenly laughed, and the sound yanked her out of her thoughts. What was so funny? She had only said—

"By the power vested in me——"

Oh gosh, I said yes.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife."

Summerine was still in shock as her bridegroom gently turned her to face him before lifting her veil.

"You may now kiss the bride."

His head lowered.

NOOOOOOOOOO.

And he cupped her face.

I can't. This can't be happening.

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And it didn't.

Because her bridegroom had already stepped back, the whole ballroom had erupted in thunderous applause, and not one of them had realized that the man she married had only faked kissing her.

The judge smiled at both of them before turning to their still-cheering guests. "Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. and Mrs. Ryu Harcourt!"

Point #2

I'M SORRY, SELF.

I failed you.

I'm so, so sorry—

(You're not forgiven.)

I'm not talking to you!

(Then who are you talking to?)

Myself!

(I rest my case.)

Summerine seriously considered knocking her head against the mirror in front of her at this point.

Her life had officially hit rock bottom.

Not only had she lost the chance to escape marriage, but she had also ended up losing an argument.

To herself!

The thought made her want to cry, and maybe she would have...if not for someone knocking on the bridal suite, and her husband of two hours walking in right after.

"Are you ready to go?"

Summerine nodded in answer even as she braced herself for a sign of impatience. Her parents had it whenever she had nothing to say, but her husband didn't seem to mind and was instead the perfect gentleman as he offered her his hand.

She expected him to move away as soon as she was on her feet. But then she felt his hand slide to the small of her back—and stay there even though she knew he was aware of how her body had involuntarily jerked at his touch.

"I'm afraid you'll have to bear with my touch whenever we're out in public."

She had no chance to respond, with her husband suddenly sweeping her up into his arms before stepping out of the bridal suite.

Oh. My. Gosh.

Hotel staff was lined up on each side of the hallway, and they were all smiles as they

showered the newlyweds with white and pink rose petals.

"Congratulations, Mr. Harcourt! Congratulations, Mrs. Harcourt!"

Summerine was still in a daze even when they were inside the luxurious confines of his limousine. She was very, very sure that her parents would never have arranged for such a surprise, and so that left only...

Ryu.

It was her first time to allow herself to even think of her husband by his given name, and doing so felt shockingly intimate.

What in the world is going on?

She should still be thinking of ways to escape this marriage, but here she was, testing the sound of his name as if it was a rare delicacy she was tasting for the first time.

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"How are you feeling?"

His sudden question had Summerine turning to him, but she could read nothing at all in his dark gaze. "I'm f-fine." She saw him frown at the way she stammered, and her heart sank. Her parents also hated hearing her stammer, and she wondered if the time would come soon that Ryu would look at her with distaste, every time he heard her trip over her words.

"Have your parents explained why I wanted to marry you?"

His quiet tone threw her off, but she didn't dare speak this time, and only answered him with a shake of her head.

"I do not want to have children."

OH.

"Most women would object to this, but after an extensive discussion with your parents——"

Summerine couldn't even begin to imagine what such a discussion would entail. What could have her parents said that would make him think she was fine with his requirements—or lack thereof?

"And having your background checked, I've come to realize that you perfectly suit my needs."

It was Summerine's first time to be considered 'perfect' for anything. She just wished she understood what exactly he deemed her perfect for.

"Your eyes are very expressive," her husband suddenly murmured.

Her own mother often chastised her for not showing enough emotion. Was he just being nice or was her husband delusional?

"I may not have known you for as long as your parents have, but I have no reason to lie about that, don't you think?"

Summerine could only stare at him, stunned. It was as if he had read her mind!

"In any case...we have all the time in the world to understand each other. We can take things one day at a time. But for now, I think I can safely guess the things you'd most likely want to hear from me."

Good, Summerine thought in relief. Actually, it wasn't just good. It was great. Terrific even. She was just so glad that he seemed to have figured things out for both of them...since Summerine had been lost in translation from the moment he had described her eyes as expressive.

"To start with, I want you to know you have no reason to be ever frightened of me. You do not have to worry about me exercising my rights as a husband. I don't intend to consummate our marriage. There'd be no point doing so, all things considered."

Um...

"Nevertheless, I expect you to demonstrate wisdom and discretion about every matter concerning our relationship."

Summerine could also nod, with her mind still stuck on Point #2. Was he saying he meant her to die...a virgin?

"I expect you to conduct yourself in a manner befitting my wife. You'll accompany me when I need a date. Host parties on my behalf. Do the usual things that a billionaire's wife does."

Everything,he said...except for Point #2.

"Lastly, I have an extremely demanding schedule at work. It cannot be helped, but I trust you're used to this, given your own parents' schedule. Other than these things, you are free to do whatever else you wish with your time."

Summerine worked hard to concentrate on the rest of his words.

Monthly allowance.

Credit cards.

Mistress of her own home.

And so many other "perks".

He wasn't just offering her freedom from her parents' tyranny. But shockingly enough, her new husband was offering everything on a silver platter, and all she needed to do in return was be his brainless, voiceless, and sexless wife?

Where am I?

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IT WAS A GOOD NINETY-minute ride to her new home, and Summerine didn't even realize she had fallen asleep until she heard her husband softly saying her name.

"I'm s-sorry."

She was already bracing herself for a harsh rebuke, but her husband only looked at her gravely. "You've probably lost a lot of sleep over the thought of marrying a complete stranger. I'm the one who should apologize. I should have taken the time to meet with you again before the wedding. But I didn't, and I apologize for that. Will you forgive me?"

All Summerine could do was nod. Never had she met someone this...this...smooth?

Ryu offered his hand once more after stepping out of the limousine, and her whole body tingled as his fingers clasped hers in a thrillingly firm grip.

(He's just holding your hand, girl.)

I know!

(So why are you acting like he's given you his heart?)

A-Am n-not!

(Then again, you're also that kid who's never been hugged by her parents—)

Summerine duct-taped her Inner Troll and refocused her attention on reality. And she

did so just in time, with Ryu smiling down at her as he presented his home.

"Welcome to Kagami."

Mirror.

Her mind automatically translated this to English, but she wasn't aware of how her lips had also silently formed the word until she saw Ryu arch a brow in her direction.

"I'm impressed."

All she could do was smile weakly...even as she was forced to gloomily accept the truth. Inner Troll was right. She was a loser, and in more ways than one, since this was also her first time to impress anyone.

"You took Japanese as an elective, didn't you?"

Summerine nodded even as she wondered if that was merely a lucky guess...or a result of the background check he had mentioned earlier.

"Shall we?"

He took her hand in his, and Summerine couldn't help but wonder if he was this chivalrous with everyone. A sharp pain pinched her heart at that moment, and Summerine wondered if she needed to have her heart checked.

While the exterior of Kagami was of sandstone, arched windows, and balconies draped with bougainvillea, her first glimpse of its interior was a mix of white marble and oak and a grand L-shaped staircase that immediately commanded attention.

"We can have a full tour tomorrow," Ryu murmured as he led her up the stairs.

It was when they reached the second floor that Summerine finally understood why his home's name was Kagami...while realizing at the same time that the man she married was far more complex than she could ever imagine.

The entire hallway consisted of mirrors. The walls. The ceilings. And even certain parts of the floor. There were also windows that mirrored each other's reflections. Mirrors that concealed storage or passageways. And mirrors that were, well, just mirrors.

By the time they went through a mirror that opened to the master suite, Summerine could barely understand what he was saying. Inside their suite was a palatial living room, a balcony on one side, a state-of-the-art kitchen on the other, and finally, a long row of mirrors (she counted ten!) opposite the entrance, and all of them doors!

Summerine's mind continued to spin as she followed behind him.

"This is your room." Ryu pointed to -guess what! -another mirror. "That's the connecting door between yours and mine. Just knock if you need anything."

So many mirrors, Summerine thought. Why were there so many mirrors?

"Do you need anything?"

She shook her head.

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"I'll let you rest then. Good night, Summerine."

It was her first time hearing him say her name, and it took every bit of her willpower not to blush. "G-Good night...R-Ryu."

She found herself stupidly and inexplicably hoping that this would earn her a smile, but all he did was nod...before stepping out of her room and closing the door behind him.

Summerine crashed on the velvet couch in a state of collapse. What in the world have I gotten myself into?

She didn't even know what to think about this house, which was more maze than mansion, or her new life as a married woman, which now seemed more Agatha Christie than Mills & Boon, more gekigathanshoujo, and—mm.

The gilded full-length mirror mounted on the wall next to the TV console had caught her eye, and Summerine was momentarily distracted by a surge of curiosity. Was it really just a mirror or something more?

She gave it a little push, and ooooooh. It actually swung open, and that was how Summerine found herself straight into her husband.

Who was in the shower.

Naked.

Enough

RYU DIDN'T SEEM ASHAMED at all as he faced her without a stitch of clothing. It even seemed as if he was giving her a chance to stare at her leisure, and so stare she did...while wondering absently if there was a Guinness record for the highest number of gulps achieved under one minute.

Because she was at #20 right now...and could anyone blame her, with how mesmerizingly virile her husband turned out to be?

Every inch of him was hard.

Like, seriously hard.

From his broad shoulders.

To his muscled chest.

And ripped abs.

Bordered by a well-defined V.

Before dipping into that.

Just...that.

Because she was too shy to even think of the word.

But not so shy that she could tear her gaze away, and—did it just—did it just, oh my gosh, it did it again! And again!

That...was alive.

Or seemed like it with how his entire length was throbbing powerfully against the taut hardness of his belly.

"Do you want a taste of it?"

Her stunned gaze flew up to Ryu...and his lips curved in the slightest of smirks.

"You do want it. Don't you, wife?"

Oh yes, I mean, no, no, no!

"Come here and taste it then."

No!

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But already she was taking her first step with legs that threatened to turn into jelly at any moment.

Absolutely not!

And yet she was taking another step.

And another.

And another.

Until her legs finally folded at the perfectly right time, and she found herself kneeling right in front of him, and she was at eye level with...that.

GulpGulpGulpGulpGulpGulpGulpGulpGulpGulpGulpGulp

Her entire body shook at the sudden feel of Ryu slowly driving his fingers through the locks of her hair.

And then he was gripping her head—

GulpGulpGulpGulpGulpGulpGulpGulpGulpGulpGulp

And she found herself gasping as he slowly guided her head to his throbbing length—

GulpGulpGulpGulpGulpGulpGulpGulpGulpGulpGulp

And finally, oh finally...

"Mrs. Harcourt?"

A formal-sounding voice was addressing her, and it was another husband's voice.

Summerine woke up to the sight of her personal driver holding the door open, his face stoic.

"I'm s-sorry."

Because I think you just witnessed something you weren't supposed to witness.

She hurried out of the backseat of the SUV that Ryu had assigned for her exclusive use, and Summerine was unable to meet Andrew's gaze as she thanked him.

A wet dream, Summerine!

Embarrassment engulfed her, and Summerine, in sudden need of a detour, made a hard right turn to the powder room as soon as she was inside the university.

You!

She glared at her reflection in a fit of woeful frustration.

How can you—

I just can't believe you—

Aaaaargh!

A week had already passed since she had become Ryu's wife.

A week.

But in that long, painfully awkward week—

She had made zero progress on planning her escape, and the thought had her glaring at her reflection anew.

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A week, Summerine! A week!

But instead, she had spent every sleepless night replaying every mortifying second of what happened after.

Because if the Ryu in her dreams was a master of seduction, reality would have been a lot less romantic.

While Summerine had started freaking out and bumping into walls in her panic, her husband had calmly wrapped a towel around his body before taking firm hold of her shoulders and saying very pleasantly, "ENOUGH."

And it had actually worked.

She had shut up. Stopped moving. And made no protest at all as he slowly had her walking backward until she was back on her side of the room.

He had then let go of her shoulders and smiled at her.

But just as she was about to smile...he had slammed the door shut on her face.

And there begins my agony over the absence of closure, Summerine thought miserably, since they hadn't talked about it at all. When she had joined him for breakfast the next day, she had been on pins and needles while waiting for him to give her an opening.

But he never had, and that was why it had come to this.

Me. Him. Wet dreams.

Because closure meant everything to a girl, and how could a smart man like him not know that?

(Is that really it, though?)

Summerine's grimace contorted into a scowl at lightning speed. Not now, Inner Troll!

(Can't handle the truth, can you?)

What truth?

(And now she's pretending not to know a thing.)

Because I really don't know—

(Why you've changed your mind about escaping your marriage?)

I did not!

(Then prove it.)

(Nothing's stopping you from leaving now.)

(So go ahead and prove it.)

It's n-not that easy—

(We both know it's that easy, girl. Just walk out of your marriage. Create some drama online and go viral. Your parents and husband will disown you, end of story.)

I could never—

(You mean you don't want to.)

(Because you've changed your mind.)

(But you're just having a hard time admitting it.)

Summerine did her best not to think of her husband for the rest of the day. And so, so focused she was on this that she didn't realize she wasn't thinking at all—

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"Watch out!"

Divorce

SUMMERINE DIDN'T KNOW which was more embarrassing: to be sent to the school clinic for having a bloody nose after accidentally walking into a wall...or to come out of said clinic and realize why the school doctor had this odd look on his face when Summerine had given her name.

Ryu didn't seem to notice the way he had everyone staring as he came forward to cup her chin.

His gaze was somber, his expression concerned. "Are you alright?"

"D-Did the——"

"School clinic contact me about you?" he finished for her. "You already know the answer to that."

The way he sounded so calm while saying this made Summerine realize her husband was a much, much bigger control freak than her parents could ever be. He was just better at hiding this.

Summerine wasn't conscious of her husband taking hold of her hand as they walked, and it was only when they were halfway to the university's parking lot that she realized where they were going.

"W-Wait——" She dug her heels, and her husband came to a stop next to her. "I still have classes——"

"You've been excused from all of them."

"F-For having a bloody nose?"

"Yes."

"But——"

"Would you rather I tell them the truth?"

"But t-thatisthe truth," she pointed out uneasily.

"It'spartof the truth, and it's why I realize I've made another mistake where you're concerned. You walked into a wall——"

Summerine couldn't help wincing upon hearing this. "It was an a-accident!"

"——because you couldn't stop thinking about how you walked in on your husband naked."

Her jaw dropped, and her gorgeous husband smiled at her.

"That's the complete truth, but perhaps I was also mistaken in assuming you didn't want your professors to know——"

"You're not mistaken," she said hastily.

"Are you sure?"

His voice was gentle, but...

Was he teasing her?

A slight smile touched her husband's lips. "Yes, Summerine. It's exactly what you're thinking Thatwasan attempt to tease you in hopes of making you relax. But it doesn't seem to be working, does it?"

"I...I..."

"Would like to smile back but you just can't?"

Yes!

"Because you're not used to having this kind of conversation with your parents?"

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Yes, twice!

"But do you remember what I told you before?" her husband asked quietly.

Oh.

"You remember then."

He had told her that she would never have to fear him for any reason.

"And I mean it, too. In every way."

He looked at her meaningfully, but...the meaning was lost on her, and when she saw his lips twitch—

Did she really have an expressive face...or did he just not want anyone to realize he was telepathic?

"No, Summerine." Her husband's tone was very dry. "I am not telepathic."

B-But—

"But I'll take it as a compliment that you think so, and speaking of compliments..."

The sudden change of subject had her frowning.

"I know that's another thing your parents haven't given you much of."

Oh.

"But I want you to know I'm not like them. I like the way you are very much, and I'd rather you don't change at all——"

OH.

"Even if it means having you bump into things whenever you walk into me na——"

"Please stop talking about that!"

It was only when she saw the gleam in Ryu's dark eyes that she realized she had actually interrupted him...without any fear of repercussion.

"That's how I'd like you to speak to me from now on. You don't have to choose your words with me. I neither expect nor need you to be perfect. You already know what I require from you, and you've performed excellently on that front."

B-But...

"What is it?"

Summerine bit her lip. "I..."

"You can tell me anything, Summerine. And I promise I won't get mad. So think it over. And if you're ready to talk to me, I'll always have time for you."

She gave him a nod, he gave her a smile, and that was when Summerine realized she no longer wanted to escape.

For better or for worse, she wanted to give their marriage her best shot.

And so from now on...

Mirror, Mirror

IT WAS HER THIRD WEEK as Mrs. Ryu Harcourt, and Summerine was humming contentedly while arranging her newly purchased mangain her newly decorated library.

Embracing her role as Ryu Harcourt's wife was easily the best decision she had made.

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Her husband was a dream, her staff at home was a dream, and her "job" as the billionaire's other half was the best dream of all.

All she had to do was attend parties, ribbon-cutting ceremonies, and product launches on his behalf.

Join him in business dinners on occasion.

Score above average grades in school.

And that was it.

Even better were the times they spent at home. If Ryu wasn't away because of one work emergency or another, he would always take the time to join her for meals and ask her about his day.

He hadn't even blinked when he had chanced upon the stacks of manga she had purchased with her allowance—but had gently chastised her instead for not using his credit card.

'I'm your husband, Summerine. Charge whatever you want to my account. It's my job to provide for you.'

He was like the big brother she had always dreamed of having, never mind if there were still times her dreams of him weren't sisterly—

(Eww.)

You're just jealous.

(Of what? Being a wife with an unrequited love for her husband?)

La la la la la.

Summerine was determined not to let her Inner Troll burst her dream-like bubble. She had the best life, period, and most unexpectedly of all, even her own parents had yet to make any attempt to interfere in said best life.

It was as if they had completely washed their hands off her now that she was married to Ryu, and as much as the thought saddened her, Summerine was also quick to remind herself that she must not be greedy.

After all, her husband was a dream. Her job as his wife was a dream. Their staff was a dream, and—oh!

Summerine absently caught sight of the apple trees outside her window and had a sudden craving for something crumbly and sweet.

Mm.

Chef Milo was always keen to remind her about dropping by his kitchen if she wanted anything special done. Maybe it was time to take him up on his offer?

Summerine was already busy imagining herself feasting on the most delicious slice of apple pie as she stepped out of her library and took a right turn here, a left turn there, and...uh oh.

It had happened again!

Summerine had lost herself in the maze of mirrors, but...she wasnotgoing to panic.

This was the ninth time that she had gotten lost, but...there was nothing to fear, Summerine reminded herself.

As mistress ofKagami, every secret door in this house was programmed to unlock after a quick scan of her fingerprints.

Ryu himself had told her this, albeit rather resignedly, after finding his wife asleep on the floor in one of the unused guest rooms that she had been unable to "escape".

I'm going to make it out this time,Summerine swore.

The trick to finding her way back to the main corridor of her home was to just unlock one secret door after another.

So...

Unlock. Unlock. Unlock.

Curiosity always struck every time she thought about all the mirrors in his home. But she had never found the courage to ask the reason behind this. Billionaires were entitled to their quirks, and she never wanted Ryu to think she was judging him or anything.

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People might think he was the king of vanity for having so many mirrors in his home, but not her!

Maybe...this was just his way of creating his own Versailles in Evergreen, Texas.

Or maybe this was his low-key way of disproving feng shui since mirrors facing each other were supposedly bad luck?

In any case, Summerine was determined to be just as supportive of his love for—
whoa. Another secret door had her stumbling into another secret room, only this new one had her covering her mouth in shock.

Guns of every caliber that were mounted on the wall. An assortment of spy cameras and lockpicking devices that were lined up in a glass case. And drawers full of cash, credit cards from different countries, and so, so many fake IDs.

Oh my goodness!

This could only mean one thing...couldn't it?

When Ryu had first moved to San Antonio, so much mystery surrounded the origin of his wealth.

His parents were supposedly murdered in South Africa.

His billion-dollar inheritance in diamonds supposedly liquidated in cash.

A large portion of his past unaccounted for, supposedly due to the years he had spent volunteering for the Red Cross in war-ravaged countries.

There were so many questions one could ask but never managed to...because of quiet charm. He just seemed so, so perfect that no one had cared to look past the surface. And maybe, no one ever had the opportunity to do so...except for his own wife.

Summerine slowly backed out of the room.

Oh no.

Was this why his staff would only smile and change the subject every time she asked them about the unique interior of his home?

Did the mirrors have nothing to do with her husband's eccentric taste in design...but everything to do with defending his home if it were under attack?

Could the gorgeous billionaire Summerine had married and whom everyone in San Antonio worshipped as the perfect gentleman...be a modern-day mob boss in disguise?

I understand.

SUMMERINE GOT TO READING as soon as she found her way back to her library. Apple pies were no longer the priority. What she needed right now was any manga, manhwa, and webcomics with a mob boss as the protagonist, and the more titles she could get her hands on, the better.

Let's see.

Summerine used to think she'd be on her phone just like everyone else...if she ever

had the chance to own one. Which she didn't while she was still living in her parents' home.

But on the day after her wedding, Ryu had gifted Summerine her own iPhone, and, well...

Social media just didn't have the same hold on her the way it did with other people her age. She wanted to post photos of herself like others did. She just wished she could give herself a reason why.

But until then...

Thank goodness for search engines!

Mere seconds were all it took for Google to spew out the necessary results, and so far, the blurbs Summerine had skimmed were pretty uniform when it came to describing the male protagonist.

A fictional (naturally) mob boss who was handsome (just like Ryu), wealthy (also just like Ryu), and secretive (was this his secret biography or what?).

But as she went on reading, and descriptions of their respective heroines were then provided...

Oh.

Okay.

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Really?

The type of woman they typically fell in love with was feisty (unlike her), resourceful (also unlike her), and huh.

Summerine tried reading a few more blurbs, but they were all the same!

It was always the mob boss falling for the girl first and not the other way around.

Which meant...

She just needed to research more titles until she found something that matched her own characteristics.

Right?

Summerine was still busy scrolling on her phone as she came down for dinner, and—eep!

Her steps crashed to an unexpected halt when she saw her husband already waiting for her in the dining room, and she immediately hid her phone behind her back. She knew she had done nothing wrong. She hadn't meant to stumble into his secret armory. So why was she feeling guilty?

Ryu looked at her curiously. "Everything okay?"

"Y-You're...w-work?" Summerine tried but failed to be coherent in her shock.

"My work finished earlier than expected if that's what you're asking."

"Oh."

"Is something wrong?"

She hastily shook her head. "N-Nothing?"

"And yet you're stammering again."

Summerine knew he had her there, and so she blurted the first excuse that came to mind, which was...

"B-Because I m-miss it?"

Oh, bleep.

Summerine was sure he was on to her now, but then she saw his lips twitch, so...maybe not?

Ryu pulled her chair out, and Summerine sighed in relief. Oh, thank goodness. She hurried forward and thanked him as he helped her to his seat.

"How was your day?"

He always asked this.

So why was she suddenly having a hard time answering it?

"I—"

Ryu started slicing into his steak.

"—am thinking of going to law school?"

As soon as the words were out, Summerine realized then and there that was exactly what she wanted to do.

She might be meek and sheltered, which were not what one would expect from a mob boss's wife...but what she lacked in courage and experience, Summerine was confident she could make up with her sincere desire to be of help to her husband. And the more she thought of herself as Ryu's future legal protector, the more excited she became.

Yes, this is really it!

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As his lawyer, she could help ensure that the wheels of justice would turn in the right direction—

"Summerine?"

"Yes?"

"Forgive me for saying this—"

Ryu seemed to be picking his words with care.

"But law school requires a lot of reading to start with—"

Summerine nodded. "Yes, that's true."

"And don't you only enjoy reading manga?"

"Which still counts as reading, right?"

"Ah."

"I really think I can do it," she assured him, "because I'm properly motivated."

"Is that so?"

She looked at him meaningfully, saying, "I want to be of help to you."

...

...

...

"Summerine?"

She brightened. "Yes?"

"I have no idea what you're trying to say with that look."

Oh.

Okay.

Maybe her face was only expressive when she wasn't deliberately communicating with him through non-verbal means?

"Why don't you just say it?"

Summerine immediately shook her head at his suggestion. "I don't think I'm supposed to."

Ryu frowned. "Why not?"

Hoping her expressive face would cooperate this time around, she gave her husband another meaningful look. Because it's not safe!

"I still don't know what you're——" A ringing sound cut him off, and Ryu's handsome face turned impassive as he glanced at his phone.

"Will you excuse me? I'll need to take this outside."

Oh, so it was that kind of call.

Summerine gave him a thumbs-up, and Ryu, in the act of rising to his feet, went absolutely still at this.

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"Are you truly ...alright?"

"Absolutely." She gave him another meaningful look. I got this.

Ryu looked as if he was on the verge of saying something, but then his phone rang again, and her husband swore under his breath.

"I'm sorry. I really have to take this call—"

"I totally understand." I'll act like everything's normal, I promise.

Ryu gave her one last look before leaving, and Summerine made a mental note to research nonverbal cues. As his wife, she had to do what she could to protect him. Marriages had to be a two-way street, and this was finally her chance to do something for Ryu instead of always being on the receiving end of her husband's kindness.

"I'm sorry," Ryu apologized as he came back to the dining room. "We have another emergency at work, and I'll need to leave again."

"I understand."

Ryu looked at her gravely. "That's what's worrying me."

Her husband truly was a dream. Wasn't that his way of saying he wanted to apologize for not being completely honest about his past?

"We'll talk when I get back, alright?"

Summerine was appalled at what she had pushed him to do. "We don't have to, I swear." The police could have their place bugged, and she didn't want to be the reason for her husband to say something incriminating in their hearing.

Ryu looked as if he wanted to call a doctor this time, but she pretended not to notice this either.

I'll make you proud, Ryu. You'll see.

She would do everything she could to show him he could trust her, and so with that in mind...

Hello, darling.

SUMMERINE WAS NERVOUSbut excited as she watched the scenery outside the car window gradually change from vast cornfields to skyscrapers and crowded streets. In just a couple of minutes, she would serve as her husband's proxy on a board meeting for the first time ever. This was also her first major chance to show Ryu that she was someone worthy of his trust.

And speaking of people who were worthy of her husband's trust...

Hmm.

"Andrew?"

The older man met her gaze through the rearview mirror. "Yes, Mrs. Harcourt?"

"How long have you been working for my husband?"

"About seven years."

"Then you're familiar with his routine."

"As familiar as anyone in his employ can be, Mrs. Harcourt."

"I'm sure you know about his...emergencies."

She gave him a meaningful look, but Andrew only gazed back at her blankly. Oh wow. Like mob boss, like mob driver, apparently.

But if Andrew thought that was enough to discourage her, ha!

"Andrew?"

"Yes, Mrs. Harcourt?"

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"My husband's emergencies at work happen quite a lot, don't you think?"

"I wouldn't really know, Mrs. Harcourt."

"I mean...he should be bankrupt by now at the rate he's having them."

"Perhaps they're not as bad as they sound."

He was so obviously doing his best to protect his employer's secret, and Summerine privately commended him for it.

"Everything alright, Mrs. Harcourt?"

She gave him a bright smile. "Yes, of course."

Everything was alright. Her husband might be a criminal, but she was not going to abandon him. Together, they would figure things out.

Andrew dropped her off at the entrance of the Sixty-Acre Woods Sanctuary, and an employee of the Sanctuary escorted her to the second-floor boardroom. It was empty save for a girl in her mid-teens, and her face immediately brightened upon seeing Summerine.

"Oh hey. Summerine, right? Ryu Harcourt's wife?"

Summerine gave a tentative smile in return. "Uh, yes..."

"I'm Billie," the girl introduced herself with ease. "My sister's married to Logan Hardwall."

Oh!

Summerine briefly recalled Logan and his wife attending her wedding, and weren't they... "You have a very expressive face," Billie remarked with a grin. "You just remembered about my sister being the nanny, didn't you?"

Summerine turned red. That was exactly what she had been thinking, but the younger girl only laughed when she tried to apologize.

"It's fine. It's totally obvious you weren't mentally dissing my sister or anything." Billie curled an arm around Summerine's. "You should totally sit next to me. I'd love to know about your love story."

Love story?

"Oh my gosh, you're blushing again. How cute!"

By the time the other board members showed up in quick succession, she and Billie had already exchanged numbers, and Summerine knew she had made her first friend in life.

"Thank you for attending today's meeting."

Summerine did her best to concentrate as Aryan Hale, the handsome but aloof founder of Sixty-Acre Woods Sanctuary, briefly outlined their agenda for the next ninety minutes.

But it was quite, quite hard...with her thoughts once again consumed by Ryu's secret

life.

Why had he chosen to be a criminal?

Did he really earn all of his money...illegally?

Was he not afraid of getting caught?

"Summerine Harcourt, to serve as a proxy for her husband Ryu Harcourt, please raise your hand if you are in attendance."

A turbulent mix of emotions overwhelmed her even as she raised her hand to confirm her presence.

Her parents might not be criminals like Ryu, but they were as cruel to her as Ryu was kind.

He's not perfect, but no one really is.

What can I do to help him?

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How do I prove to him I'm on his side?

The meeting was adjourned without Summerine finding any answer to her questions, but she did her best to hide her unease as she and Billie headed down to wait for their respective rides outside the sanctuary.

Billie suddenly nudged her side and gestured for Summerie to come close. "That's Heaven Gaines," she whispered under her breath.

Summerine followed Billie's line of sight. "Am I supposed to know her?" The other woman Billie was referring to was standing on the opposite side of the road. She was astoundingly beautiful, and oh...

Billie clucked her tongue. "You saw it, too, didn't you?"

Summerine gave her new friend a wide-eyed nod. The other woman had noticeably paled at the sight of Aryan Hale driving past her, and equally obvious was the hardened expression on the billionaire's face upon noticing her presence.

"He hates Heaven's guts for some reason," Billie confided, "but he's letting her stay out of respect for Devon's wife Harry, who personally vouched for her."

Summerine was incredulous. "How do you even know these things?"

"Because everyone thinks I'm a kid," Billie answered cheekily, "and so no one really watches their word around me."

"I'll consider myself duly warned."

Billie rolled her eyes. "Like you have something to hide about your perfect marriage. I was at another meeting as Logan's proxy, and your husband happened to be seated next to me when I heard him answer his phone."

Summerine struggled not to laugh at the way Billie perfectly imitated the way her husband would reach for his phone. She couldn't put it in words either, but the way Ryu moved was akin to a nocturnal predator on the hunt—

"Hello, darling," she heard Billie then say.

And just like that, Summerine suddenly felt she was being hunted by her own stupidity.

Billie looked at her teasingly. "Do you call him 'darling', too?"

Emergencies

SUMMERINE STRUGGLED to make sense of her feelings as Andrew drove them back to Evergreen.

Her husband not only led a double life as a criminal.

But he was also guilty of adultery.

And when she caught Andrew glancing at her as he texted something on his phone—

She finally understood why her chest felt inexplicably tight, and her heart seemed to have turned into stone.

"Are you texting my husband?"

Andrew hurriedly pocketed his phone at her words. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Harcourt."

"For texting my husband?"

"For texting during work hours. It won't happen again."

"Texting during work hours doesn't count if you're texting my husband."

"I know—I mean, no," the older man hastily corrected himself. "I am not texting your husband, Mrs. Harcourt."

"Will you show me your phone then?"

Andrew had the grace to flush when he realized how neatly Summerine had him trapped in a corner.

"Andrew?"

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"Yes, Mrs. Harcourt?"

"Can you please just answer one last question for me?"

"I..."

"It won't get you in trouble, I promise."

"I'll try, Mrs. Harcourt."

"Do you think...if I ask my husband to...d-delegate some of his emergencies and have someone else handle it, do you think h-he'll say yes?"

Summerine could see the older man hesitating.

"Please, Andrew."

And she realized she wasn't too shy to take advantage of this.

"I just need to know the truth."

The older man looked at her gravely. "If you're asking what I believe Mr. Harcourt would likely choose if it were between you and his emergencies at work——"

Summerine held her breath.

"I believe it's best that you don't ask him to choose, Mrs. Harcourt. There are some

things we are better off not knowing."

Soft Spot

(DO YOU SEE THE IRONYhere?)

Please just let me have my moment.

(You didn't even blink when you learned your husband was a criminal.)

Because I'm not the type to judge.

(But you're bawling your eyes out now because he has someone else?)

Because it's hurtful!

(Again: do you see the irony here?)

Really hurtful!

(Why is it even hurtful?)

Because!

(Have you forgotten your marriage isn't normal?)

Even so!

(You know what this really means, right?)

Don't say it.

(You're——)

I said don't!

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(In—)

Summerine shoved Inner Troll back into its closet and splashed ice-cold water on her face.

Ryu would be home soon, and it was important that he didn't realize she had shed a single tear.

She applied her makeup in a hurry and did her best to act normal when it was finally time to join her husband for dinner.

"Welcome back." She forced herself to greet him like she always did...even though a part of her just wanted to kick him really, really hard under the table and start yelling at his face.

How! Dare! You! Cheat!

"Thank you. It's good to be back." Ryu looked at her curiously. "Is something wrong?"

Summertime forced herself to smile. "Nothing's wrong."

Just act like everything's normal, Summerine reminded herself.

Normal. Normal. Normal.

And while she gave it her best shot—

Her best clearly wasn't good enough when Ryu asked to have a word with her once they were back in their suite.

Oh no.

"Do you want anything to drink?"

Salted caramel latte, Summerine thought absently. It was what she always drank whenever—

"Maybe a hot salted caramel latte?"

Her jaw dropped. How did he know that was her happy pill?

His lips twitched, and Summerine absolutely hated the way her heart skipped a beat over such a simple thing.

"I had your background checked, remember?"

She watched him head over to the counter where their coffee machine was, and Summerine was treated to the unexpected sight of Ryu getting rid of his blazer in order to roll his sleeves up to his elbows.

Oh...no.

She never used to notice the way the muscles in his arms flexed with his every move. Why did she have to start doing so...just when she knew for sure that he had another woman in his life?

"All done."

Summerine knew without being told that those words were a subtle command for her to joined him, and she could feel him watching her as she took one of the bar stools.

"T-Thank you for this."

She pretended not to notice his frown at the way she stammered. Summerine raised the cup to her lips and took a sip.

Oh.

"It seems I've just found one of your soft spots."

Only after hearing the smile in his words did she realize that she had actually ended up closing her eyes.

Becauseyes,it was that good.

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But...what about him?

Why was it always so easy for her husband to correctly guess everything about her while—

"Would you like to know what mine is?"

And he was doing it again!

Amusement gleamed in his dark eyes. "Your face gives away everything."

She stared at him darkly. "I wish it didn't."

"That's a pity then," her husband didn't hesitate to parry back, "since I'd rather you stay as you are."

I don't believe you.

"You don't believe me?"

Aaaargh!

Summerine covered her face just to stop him from reading her expression, but this only made her husband chuckle.

"You're surprisingly easy to tease."

Summerine didn't allow herself to be baited, her face still hidden behind her hands.

"If you want to know what my soft spot is, I'll need to see your face, though."

"What for?" Her voice came out muffled, with her hands still acting as a shield.

"Just because."

Ryu pulled her hands down as he spoke, and since she was no match for his strength—

Oh.

Her gaze collided with his, and her oh-so-stupid heart raced and ached at the same time.

How could Ryu smile at her so gently...even when he had another woman whom he called his darling?

"Care to guess what my soft spot is?" her husband suddenly asked.

"I...can't think of any."

"And if I said it was you?"

Summerine fought against the urge to clutch her chest, which had tightened to the point of pain.

"You don't believe me?"

"Should I?"

"How about I tell you something else?"

Her forehead creased.

"And it's something I've never told anyone before."

Oh my gosh.

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Was he going to tell her about his other job? Or maybe his other woman? Or maybe—

"You see...it's rare that I would need an outlet of any kind."

—something else?

"But if Iwereto need one—"

Summerine held her breath without knowing why.

"There are certain types of sports that immediately come to mind."

Summerine didn't see that coming at all. "W-What kind of sports?"

"The kind—"

The kind...what?

"That—"

That...what?

"You're not likely to play, unfortunately."

Next!

I'M NOT DESPERATE,okay?

(Yes. You are.)

I only want to explore my options.

(And those options just happen to be the top sports rich men play?)

Yes!

(Again: desperate.)

Summerine decided it was time to put Inner Troll back where it belonged and start practicing her swing.

Thank heavens for Billie.

The younger girl had been completely supportive when Summerine awkwardly asked for her help in keeping her plans a secret.I want to surprise my husband by learning how to play his favorite sports.

All it had taken was one quick call, and Summerine soon found herself visiting a driving range for the first time, and with her own bag of expensive golf clubs to boot.

Billie gave her an encouraging smile. "You can do it."

Summerine randomly selected a club from the bag—

"Uh, not that."

"No, not that either."

"Um—"

Billie took Summerine's third choice out of her hand and replaced it with...whoa.

Summerine nearly dropped the club in her surprise.

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Who knew golf clubs could be this heavy?

Billie stepped back and gave her a thumbs-up. "Jia you!"

Summerine wrapped her fingers experimentally around the club to test her grip.

Club. Ball. Swing.

It should be easy.

Right?

She took a deep breath. Rotated her shoulders the way other golfers did. And then she drew her club back—

Wrong!

Summerine whirled around in dismay the moment she heard a man yell in pain behind her and Billie hurriedly calling the staff for help.

Oh...dear.

Golf might not be for her, but...

SUMMERINE JOINED THEqueue for the beginner's slope in the indoor ski park. Everyone else in line was about half herheight, but that was totally fine. It was all about finishing well and not where one started.

Her heart started pounding as she watched one kid after another disappear from view. A part of her was just waiting for someone to shout for help (and give her an excuse to back out), but all she heard was the line attendant shouting, "Next!"

I can do this.

(No. You can't.)

Can't you be supportive for once?

(You're about to break your own neck, and you want me to support that?)

I'm not going to break my neck!

(You're afraid of heights.)

I can get past that!

(You're afraid of speed.)

I can get past that, too!

(And now you want to face both in one go?)

Watch me.

Summerine's turn finally came up.

(Just cross this one out and move on to the next sport.)

She stared down at the manmade slope before her.

"Are you going or not?" the line attendant asked impatiently.

Summerine took a deep breath...and stepped back.

Skiing

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Sailing

Horseback riding

Polo

Scuba diving

Racecar driving

Skydiving

A week had already passed, and with Ryu having already called ahead to let her know that he was flying back the next day, there was only one thing left to do.

Mon Coeur

I'M SORRY, RYU.

I know this is unfair to you.

But I'd like a divorce.

The words sounded good in her mind.

Sincereeven.

Butclear.

And so she took a deep breath and turned to face the full-length mirror in her walk-in closet—

"Summerine?"

—only to have Ryu's velvety voice cut into her thoughts, and she ended up jumping back in shock instead.

"Do you need more time to prepare?"

"Uh, n-no. I'm g-good."

She grabbed her purse from the dresser and nearly tripped in her hurry to get to the door. Old habits died hard, and there was still that child in her who feared being sent to her room without dinner. Making her parents late for this party or that was unforgivable in their book, no matter the reason.

Summerine rushed out of her bedroom and barreled straight into her husband's impossibly hard chest.

"Careful."

The feel of his fingers cupping her elbows was more than enough to set her entire body on fire.

"Are you alright?"

Summerine managed a nod, not trusting herself yet to speak.

She had already decided that tonight was the last event she would attend as his wife.

And after that...

"I don't mind waiting if there's something else you need to do."

Summerine shook her head, and his gaze turned thoughtful.

He continued to study her in silence, and Summerine fought against the urge to squirm and turn red under his scrutiny.

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You have no reason to feel guilty, she chided herself.

Ryu was a good man.

He was, in fact, the nicest billionaire she had ever met.

Or the nicest criminal.

But even so.

She still wanted out of this marriage.

Because finding out that he had another woman...was how she had also realized she had already fallen in love with him.

"GOOD EVENING, EVERYONE!"

Summerine clapped alongside all the other guests as the stage curtains parted to reveal a curvaceous blonde dressed in a little black dress and stilettos.

Since the woman was also very much pregnant, the outfit should have been a horrible choice. But Charlee-Mae being Charlee-Mae, she easily made it work and emerged instead as a picture of grace, sass, and motherhood at its lushest.

"How y'all doing?"

This, too, was classic Charlee-Mae, and the casual greeting had everyone laughing.

If only I had a fraction of her confidence, Summerine thought wistfully. Then maybe...she would have the courage to stay in her marriage and fight for her husband's love.

"I'm so tempted right now to speak in French, you guys."

Summerine bit back a smile as Charlee-Mae's announcement had most guests groaning...and then groaning anew when the audience cam zoomed in on Philippe de Rose's handsome face, whose expression was that of a man falling in love anew with his wife.

San Antonio's beloved heiress-turned-vlogger blew a kiss upon seeing the look on her husband's oh-so-gorgeous face. "Je t'aime, mon coeur!"

Everyone understood what Charlee-Mae had said, but the way she had pronounced each word, well...

Charity balls were a dime a dozen these days, and it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that having Charlee-Mae as host was one of the major reasons why guests were willing to pay \$10,000 each for a dinner seat.

That being said...there was absolutely no denying Charlee-Mae's unique ability to destroy other people's eardrums with her husband's native language. It was, in a word, atrocious...or at least it did so to everyone's ears save for the French wine-making tycoon himself, whose gorgeous features were now stained by a light flush.

The more terrible his wife's accent, the more attracted the French billionaire was, apparently, and wasn't it the sweetest and oddest proof of true love?

Charlee-Mae turned to her audience with the widest of smiles. "I don't care what you all think. My husband loves my French, and so that makes it official. My French is

the best, period. And speaking of best..."

A stage assistant handed her a velvet envelope.

"The votes are in, and without further ado...this year's Most Romantic Couple of San Antonio is none other than——"

Charlee-Mae opened the envelope with a flourish.

"Mr. and Mrs. Ryu Harcourt."

Most Romantic Couple

THE LIVE CAM IMMEDIATELY panned to the recipients of the award, and Charlee-Mae felt like aww-ing with the rest of the audience.

It was only two years ago that Ryu Harcourt had bought a ranch in Evergreen, Texas, and the mystery surrounding his past had only whetted the appetite of every single lady in San Antonio.

Charlee-Mae could still remember how all the women had vied for his attention like crazy. But it was all for naught, with the billionaire taking the city by surprise when he made the incredibly ladylike Summerine his bride.

And if rumors were to be believed, theirs was also a whirlwind romance much like Charlee-Mae and Philippe's, with Ryu supposedly taking one look at the girl and falling head over heels.

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How romantique!

Charlee-Mae was not the only one smitten with the young couple. All the other guests looked ready to swoon as they watched Ryu offer his arm to his young wife. Watching the couple smile so gently at each other was reminiscent of a knight and his dainty and delicate princess, with Ryu looking his usual tall, dark, and dashing self, and his twenty-year-old wife just so wonderfully demure...that no one would guess how Summerine was internally struggling with the worst case of impostor's syndrome.

How could she and Ryu win this year's Most Romantic Couple when they were on the brink of divorce?

It was a rather long walk to the stage, made worse by Inner Troll doing what it did best—

(Are you sure about divorcing him?)

And that was to either taunt or confuse her, whichever was likely to make her feel worse.

(What will you do if he does let you go?)

(Do you even know how to earn a living?)

(Why don't you just pretend you don't know anything?)

Summerine was relieved when they finally made it on stage, and she had a valid reason to shove Inner Troll back into the closet.

"Congratulations, you two!"

Charlee-Mae welcomed each of them with a warm hug, and Summerine privately bemoaned having to meet the other woman under such awful circumstances.

She had always looked up to Charlee-Mae, and while she had always wished their paths would one day cross...whydid it have to happen at what was the lowest point of her life?

Charlee-Mae stepped back from the couple and turned to her audience with a mischievous smile. "I've seen how Ryu accepts awards, and let's just say it's a good thing he's not hard to look at."

The ballroom rang with laughter at Charlee-Mae's apt description, and even Summerine was hard pressed not to smile.

Since Ryu was a much-loved subject among the city's top gossips, everyone knew how the billionaire limited his thank-you speech to exactly that.

Thank you.

"But don't you worry, dear friends." Charlee-Mae gave her audience a conspirational smile. "Instead of having Ryu deliver his usual speech, and in honor of the nature of their award——"

Charlee-Mae snapped her fingers, and the crowd oohed and aahed as mistletoe balloons began raining down the entire ballroom.

"This year's winning couple shall seal tonight's festivities with a romantic kiss!"

Faked

SUMMERINE DIDN'T EVEN blink when Ryu cupped her face.

Been there, done that.

She closed her eyes as his head started to lower. Winning this award only made her realize how good Ryu was at fooling everyone, herself included. If not for Billie inadvertently making her realize he was cheating on her, she would still be doing her low-key best to win his heart—

"I'm sorry I have to do this."

Ryu's whispered words interrupted her thoughts, but before she could figure out what he was apologizing for—

AH!

His lips had already covered hers, and Summerine realized this was not like their first kiss as husband and wife during their wedding.

Because this was real, not fake.

Real.

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His lips and her lips.

Real.

And they were pressed against each other, and—no!

It was already over before it even began, but that momentary contact was still more than enough to leave Summerine in a daze.

She was only vaguely aware of Charlee-Mae waving goodbye after thanking the other guests, Ryu pressing a hand on the small of her back, and Philippe de Rose walking towards them from the wings as soon as the stage curtains drew closed.

Oh, Ryu.

He had actually kissed her.

But why?

He had faked their wedding kiss, so why did he kiss her for real now?

Charlee-Mae smiled up at her husband as he reached her side. "Aren't they the most adorable couple?"

As Philippe curved an arm around his wife's waist, he also happened to notice the way Summerine had jerked upon having her relationship described as "adorable."

But since it was only Charlee-Mae's happiness that mattered to him——

"They are, indeed." Philippe dished out the lie without hesitation. The other couple's problem was their business to deal with, and it was neither his interest nor inclination to meddle.

This is really it.

SUMMERINE COULDN'T stop touching her lips.

He kissed me.

It was all she could think about.

But why?

Had something changed between Ryu and the other woman?

And if that was the case——

"Summerine?"

Her husband's unusually taut voice startled Summerine out of her thoughts, and she quickly lowered her hand when she realized she was still tracing her lip.

"I'm sorry about the kiss. Turning down De Rose's wife would only have caused people to talk."

The grim expression on his handsome face was new as well.

Could something really have happened?

"I'll do my best not to let such a thing happen again. I promise."

His jaw clenched, and Summerine realized that he was feeling...guilty?

The thought had Summerine fumbling for her phone, and she started scrolling haphazardly. She just needed an excuse not to meet his gaze, just needed something to busy herself with while pain threatened to swallow her up.

That one kiss from him had rocked her entire world.

But her husband looked as if he wished it hadn't happened at all.

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It was just one kiss, and he was already acting like he was guilty of adultery—even though Summerine herself was his wife.

I need to end this, Summerine thought miserably, before I become so pathetic that I won't even recognize myself.

Ryu made it so easy for her to pretend when they were together.

Just so easy to get carried away.

So easy to hope...even though, in truth, she never had any reason to hope at all.

Summerine wasn't sure how she was able to keep it together throughout the ride, but as soon as she got to her room—

Oh, finally!

She shoved her face into a pillow and burst into tears.

I think this is really it, self.

(I know.)

Summerine cried even harder at this.

(And I'm sorry.)

Her life had officially hit a new all-time low...if even Inner Troll was being nice to her.

The Affair

I'M SORRY.

I know I'm lucky to have you.

I know I'm asking too much.

And that I'm causing you trouble you don't deserve.

But I'm just so, so sorry.

I can no longer stay in this marriage.

I want a divorce.

Summerine was up all night perfecting her message.

Because this time, she was no longer in denial.

She had accepted that she was a coward.

And so, it was not possible at all for her to say these things to her husband's face.

She was a coward, and that was why she waited until she was safely within the walls of her university before hitting Send on her message.

Oh, bleep.

Every second that passed was like waiting for a ticking bomb to explode. Her heart felt as if it was about to burst from her chest, but minutes turned into hours, and it was already time for lunch, but she had yet to hear anything from her husband.

Why isn't he texting back?

Her message was already labeled Read.

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Could he have accidentally opened her message without actually reading it?

Or did he simply not care?

Summerine decided to skip lunch and spend her hour-long break in the storage shed at the back of the university.

The place was something she had accidentally discovered some months ago, and she had come to think of it as her private little retreat when she needed time to think without anyone knowing where she was.

The shed had been dusty during her first visit, but after hours of cleaning and Summerine sneaking in furniture she had bought online every now and then, the place now possessed a rather cozy atmosphere with a thick rug laid over the floor, a bean bag, and a dozen throw pillows.

Summerine kept refreshing her inbox, but nothing came up. Exhaustion seeped into her bones, and her eyes began to droop.

She wasn't quite sure what woke her up later on. All she knew was that it started with this uneasy feeling of being stared at. And as the cobwebs of sleep gradually cleared, and she remembered that she was still in the storage shed, and—

Oh no.

She sat up in a start, her eyes wide open, and oh dear.

Ryu was seated right in front of her, his dark gaze hooded, his lips pressed in a tight line, and his jaw clenched tight.

He had taken one of the wooden chairs piled up at the back of the shed, and as he leaned back and crossed one leg over the other, Summerine finally remembered one last but extremely important thing.

Oh no.

"Hello, Summerine."

She had asked him for a divorce this morning, and the thought had her croaking out in reply.

"H-Hello."

"I received a text from you this morning."

Summerine's mouth went dry. How could such a soft voice sound so terrifyingly menacing at the same time?

"I was hoping it was an ill-thought prank."

Was that why he hadn't replied?

"But when I didn't hear from you again, well..."

Ryu's voice trailed off, but this alone felt as if she suddenly had the barrel of a gun pointed at her head.

"May I ask why you want a divorce?"

She slowly opened her mouth, but Summerine wasn't surprised when no words came out.

"Cat got your tongue?"

Ryu had her so frightened that even the act of thinking straight was a problem, much less string words together coherently. "I...I..."

"You're what?"

Cold sweat coated her skin at Ryu's biting tone.

Never had he spoken to her in this manner—

"Having an affair behind my back?"

And the reason he did so was because he had clearly lost his mind!

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Let her go.

A NERVOUS LAUGH SPILLED past Summerine's lips, but she knew right away that this was a mistake when she saw his dark eyes glint at the sound.

"I'm s-sorry," she blurted out. "I'm j-just nervous——"

"Are you now?"

"Y-Yes!"

"I want to believe you, Summerine. But I can't help thinking you're lying to me——"

"I swear I'm not," she cried out.

"——since you're also the same woman whose lover was stupid enough to confront me with this."

Summerine automatically reared back when she saw his hand move. A part of her was already dreading the impact of his hand landing painfully on her cheek...but all he did was toss his phone on the rug.

"Go on. Read it."

Her hands shook as she reached for his phone, and Summerine's lips parted in shock when she saw the message on its screen.

I'M IN LUV W UR WIFE.

SHE DESERVES BETTER THAN U.

LET HER GO.

She had to read it again and again just to make sure she wasn't imagining things.

And when her gaze finally flew back to him—

"I..."

Words still completely failed her.

Because this was insane.

"I—It's..."

Why would anyone send her husband something patently untrue?

Who could possibly gain from destroying her husband's trust in her?

It just made no sense unless...oh my gosh.

There was indeed one person who would benefit from creating a rift between Ryu and her, and Summerine was torn between wanting to cry foul and just letting things be...if this was what it took for her to obtain a divorce.

You caught me.

I'm sorry.

It's true.

I have been cheating with another man behind your back.

So please let me go.

Summerine's fists clenched against her sides at the thought of having to admit something so painfully untrue.

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"I want to hear you say it, Summerine."

But if this was the price she had to pay for her freedom and his—

Her eyes started to sting as she forced herself to meet his gaze.

Say it.

Her heart started to hammer.

Say it.

Her lungs started to burn.

Say it.

And when her lips finally parted—

"No, it's n-not true," she heard herself choke out.

"Then just tell me his name."

His tone had actually turned cajoling, but this only freaked her out. It was as if her husband had turned into a complete stranger, and his Perfect-Gentleman persona was nothing but a sham.

"I give you my word I won't harm him."

This was the real Ryu Harcourt all along—

"I just need to get rid of him."

And did he just threaten to commit murder?

"W-What exactly do you mean?" Summerine stammered.

"Why do you even ask," her husband asked in a suddenly cold voice, "when you say you're not having an affair?"

"Because you're scaring me!"

"Good."

Summerine was horrified. Was he actually happy that he was scaring her?

"You need to understand from now on that I am not the kind of person anyone wants to mess with."

"I u-understand!" And she really, really did, more so than he probably imagined.

"So, let's do this again, shall we?"

"B-But—"

"Who's the guy?"

Summerine had barely started shaking her head when she saw Ryu close his eyes as if needing to control himself from strangling her...and the sight was enough to have her entire body shudder.

"I-I'm n-not——"

"Stop lying to me."

The softness of his voice was like having the sharpest blade press against her throat, and Summerine felt as if she was about to faint at the sound.

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"Do you think I don't know this whole place is your fuck pad?"

What...did he just say?

"Do you think I haven't done my due fucking diligence?"

He thought this was her...what?

"This hellhole is the only blind spot in the entire university——"

It was?

"The only fucking place in the entire property that isn't covered by the security cameras——"

B-But...

"Are you going to tell me right now that's just a coincidence?"

"Y-Yes!" Because it really was a coincidence, and——

AAAH!

Ryu was suddenly on the floor, having leaped from his seat before crouching down on one knee in an abrupt move that had Summerine hastily backing away in fear.

"I'm going to give you one last time to tell me the truth."

"R-Ryu, p-please——"

"Are you having an affair?"

Tears of terror started rolling down her cheeks. "I s-swear I'm n-not——"

"Don't lie——"

"A-And I can prove it," she hurriedly gasped out, "b-because I'm s-still a v-virgin!"

Fools Rush In

SUMMERINE KNEW SHE had made a mistake the moment the words had flown out of her mouth.

I'm dead.

(You are.)

Not helping.

Ryu slowly unfolded back to his full height and stared down at her with unfathomable dark eyes.

(And you're in for it now.)

Really NOT helping.

(Try not to get yourself killed.)

Excuse me?

But there was no forthcoming reply, and Summerine was torn between tears and laughter at how her Inner Troll had willingly shut itself back in the—

Oh.

No.

Ryu had walked back to his chair, and even she was no idiot not to understand what he meant to do when he crooked a finger at her.

Yes, she had dreamt he'd do something like this—

"Come here."

But oh, the very idea of what he meant to do—

"Don't be scared."

Summerine took several gulps of air in an attempt to calm her racing heartbeat. Weren't those the last words a victim typically heard from their would-be murderer?

"Please take a seat, Summerine."

"I...I..."

"Know this has to be done," he finished for her.

"By a doctor," she hastened to add.

"Or your husband," he parried back without missing a beat, "which I am. So be a good girl," Ryu actually purred, "and come here."

Her husband had actually purred.

And fool that she was, the sound actually worked, and she found herself obeying his command.

Her knees knocked against each other as she walked, and she felt as if she was in a trance as she took a seat.

Ryu took another chair to sit in front of her...before oh-so-slowly reaching for her legs under her dress.

His touch was like fire, but when she started to look down—

"Eyes on me."

Her stunned gaze flew back up at his command.

"And you can't look down until I say so."

His hands slowly traveled up her trembling thighs, and her breath caught when his fingers came into contact with the waistband—aaaah.

Ryu's gorgeous face remained impassive as he tore the scrap of silk from her flesh, and Summerine was no longer sure if she was trembling out of fear...or shameful excitement.

Maybe even both?

He pocketed the torn piece of fabric while his gaze locked her in place.

"Open your legs."

No. No. No.

Her mind reeled at the command even as her legs parted open.

"Wider."

Had she already turned into his slave without knowing it, and that was why she was unable to resist his command?

"Wider."

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His tone was firm now.

Like a master to his slave, she realized helplessly even as unused muscles in her legs began to protest.

"I can smell your desire, wife."

The shocking intimacy of his words, and the fact that it was Ryu's first time to address her in such a way, had her body shuddering in a way that thrilled and terrified her at the same time. And when she, too, started to notice how a musky scent had tinged the air...

Fire burst in her cheeks, and the way his gaze gleamed only had her face feeling hotter than ever.

Summerine couldn't ever remember feeling this mortified.

This exposed.

But most of all, she couldn't remember feeling this restless.

It was as if flames of lust were licking every inch of her, and she had to fight against the urge to start writhing in the chair.

"You're starting to feel it, don't you?"

Oh no.

The way he was taunting her was so much like the Ryu in her dreams, and it just made her feel more of everything.

Mortified.

Exposed.

And so, so achingly restless that just as she started to wonder if she was about to lose her mind—

"You want me."

A cry spilled past her lips as the truth of his words hit her.

"So ask for it."

The words were crazy-familiar, and the lines of reality and fantasy began to blur.

"Ask for me to touch you, Summerine."

She stared at him in a mixture of shock and helpless desire.

Did he just say—

"Ask me to see if you really are as innocent as you say you are."

She could only moan.

He really did say—

"Ask me."

It was that tone again.

A firmness that a master reserved for his slave, and it was as irresistible as ever.

"Please," she heard herself whimper. "P-Please..."

"That would do...for now."

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She hadn't any time to digest his words.

Aaaaah.

Since he was already touching her.

His long fingers sliding past her throbbing folds.

Until he had her gasping as he came into contact with undeniable proof of her innocence——

"R-Ryu..."

She didn't even realize she had whispered his name until she saw him jerk.

And then his eyes were locking with hers once more——

"R-Ryu!"

She ended up sobbing out his name this time.

Because his fingers were suddenly moving.

In a way that had her breath hitching——

Her head spinning——

And her breasts swelling and aching—

Until pleasure brought her to the edge of oblivion.

When Summerine woke for thesecondtime in the storage shed, it was to find herself cradled on her husband's lap.

Embarrassing memories flooded her mind a moment later—

Oh my gosh!

But his arms only tightened around her when she tried to escape his hold.

"Be still."

Her limbs were frozen in immobility all at once, and Summerine was in utter despair. Why was she so powerless whenever he usedthattone of his?

"Look at me."

She so, so wished she could deny the command...but she couldn't.

Summerine reluctantly lifted her gaze to his...and was immediately confused by the brooding look on Ryu's gorgeous face.

"I apologize for doubting you," her husband said tautly. "But it's also unfortunate that you're not lying."

Her confusion grew. "W-Why is it unfortunate?"

"Because it means whoever sent me that message wasn't lying either."

"B-But——"

"My wife is in love with another man...and love has the tendency to make people do regrettably foolish things."

Ryu was back on his feet by the time he finished speaking, and Summerine was still trapped in his arms when he walked out of the storage——whoa.

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One, two, three...ten...twelve...fourteen.

"H-Had something happened?"

There were fourteen men in black waiting outside the storage shed, and all of their attention was focused solely on Ryu...and her?

Ryu's air suddenly tickled her skin, and Summerine barely managed to bite back a moan.

"It turns out I don't like sharing," her husband whispered mockingly into her ear, "and they've all been hired to ensure it stays that way. From now on, I'll be the only man in your life."

Believe

SUMMERINE WAS STILLspeechless in shock when Ryu dropped her back home, kissed her forehead, andwarnedher in a very pleasant voice to 'forget the bastard who had dared to encroach on his property'.

"If you want what's good for him, that is."

Ryu didn't give her a chance to explain, and all she could do was gaze helplessly as his limo sped out of view.

What in the world just happened?

Summerine didn't even know what her problem was at this point.

If she allowed her husband to continue thinking she had cheated on him, would he eventually give her a divorce?

But if she protested her innocence, would he let her go if she asked for her freedom?

Was divorce still an option even...considering how things had changed between Ryu and her?

(Oh, c'mon now. Are we still going to be in denial?)

I'm not—

(The writing's on the wall. And it's very, very wet—)

Oh my gosh, how crude can you get?

(You tell me. I'm YOUR Inner Troll. Remember?)

Summerine's shoulders slumped. How in the world had she ended up losing an argument with herself—again?

(Want me to spell it out for you?)

Not really.

(Aww, don't you be self-pitying like that. It's not that bad, you know.)

Isn't it?

(Not at all. Because the truth's very simple.)

I'm not gonna like this, am I?

(You're in love with him.)

Oh, bleep.

(And this time, you're ready to fight for him.)

Summerine's knees folded, but she was saved from face-planting the tiled floors of the foyer with all fourteen of her bodyguards charging forward to her rescue.

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(Oh, and you're right, you're not gonna like it.)

I'm dead.

(Not until tonight, I'm guessing, but what a way to go, right?)

And it was with these thoughts running continuously through her head that she unintentionally bought herself a reprieve.

IT WAS ALREADY DARKoutside the house when Summerine woke. She felt woozy and hot, but then she turned to her side and saw Ryu seated next to her bed, and it was like having a bucket of ice-cold water thrown at her face.

She sat up with a start and winced immediately as the sides of her temple throbbed.

"Easy now," her husband murmured. "The doctor came in to see you earlier."

"I d-don't remember."

"You've contracted some kind of bug, but Dr. Sherman has already given you antibiotics."

So that was why. Her head didn't just hurt awfully. Her nose also itched unbearably, and her lips felt terribly dry.

"That bad?"

Realizing that her so-called expressive face was guilty of giving everything away again, Summerine could only nod and admit the truth. "Horrible."

"Then we're on the same boat."

Her eyes widened. "You're sick, too?" Because right now, her husband looked his usual ridiculously good self and in tip-top shape.

"Not exactly——"

She looked at him in confusion, and his lips twisted in a self-mocking smile.

"But if you put yourself in my shoes..."

She still didn't get it.

"And realize that your wife has managed to make herself sick at the thought of only having one man in her life——"

Oh...

"And that's none other than her husband, naturally——"

No.

"It's a valid reason to feel horrible, don't you think?"

Summerine felt as if her temperature had spiked by a couple of degrees by the time Ryu finished speaking. "It's...it's n-not like that at all," she finally managed to protest.

"While evidence suggests otherwise," her husband murmured, "I'm willing to start on

a clean slate if you are."

Summerine nodded eagerly. "Absolutely!"

His lips curved in a smile of approval, and Summerine's breath caught.

"Tell me then..."

She looked at him expectantly.

"How do I make you fall in love with me instead?"

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Did he just ask...what she thought he asked?

"I don't like loose ends, and I've realized that even if I were to get rid of your other lover——"

Summerine's headache was making it hard for her to think. Should she just tell him the truth? And maybe confront him with his own infidelity while at it?

"That won't stop you from cheating again."

"But I really didn't——"

"Ah, yes, I apologize. I stand corrected. You simply fell for another man——"

Summerine mentally threw her hands up in surrender.

"But we can't have that happen again, can we? And the only way to prevent it is for me to be the love of your life——"

Summerine just had to choke at how easily such words rolled off his tongue.

"Permanently, of course."

"C-Can't you see how crazy that sounds?"

Dark eyes narrowed at her. "Is it that hard to imagine yourself in love with me? Or are you saying that because the other man means that much to you?"

"N-No——"

"No, he doesn't mean that much to you...which means he does exist?"

"I——" Summerine couldn't believe how he had effortlessly twisted her words into an admission. "It's n-not——"

"You don't need to explain. And even if you don't think I can make you fall in love with me——"

You really can't, Summerine thought helplessly, since I'm already in love with you!

"It will happen."

She stared at him uneasily. "T-That sounds like a threat——"

"Because it is."

A shiver rocked her body at the sudden hardness of his tone. Gone was the perfect gentleman she had been living with for the past several weeks, and in its place might be the real Ryu.

A.K.A...the mob boss.

"Your body's already mine to command, Summerine."

The silky reminder had her struggling with a conflicting mix of fear, confusion, and foolish excitement.

"It's only a matter of time before your heart follows."

Yes...I mean...absolutely not!

Horried at how quickly he had been able to turn her head around with his seductive words, Summerine opened her mouth to tell him very clearly that she was her own person—but ended up swallowing food as Ryu took advantage of her parted lips when he fed her a spoonful of...wow.

His lips curved in a smirk. "Good, right?"

She wished she could say no, but when she saw him scoop another spoonful of the most delicious bowl of porridge she had ever tasted, her lips had already parted open—aaah, why was this so, so good?

"It's Japanese porridge," Ryu murmured in amusement. "We call itokayo."

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Summerine finished the entire bowl in seconds and was embarrassed when she accidentally let loose a burp after the last spoonful of porridge. "I'm s-sorry——"

But her husband only leaned forward...and Summerine stopped breathing at the feel of his thumb wiping the corner of her mouth.

"You missed something."

Then he should have told her that,she thought miserably,instead of nearly giving her a heart attack.

"I'm sorry," her husband said as he straightened back in his seat.

Why was he——

"The doctor says you should take things easy for the next couple of days," he said solemnly. "I'll do my best not to accidentally excite you with my touch."

——so good at reading her stupidly expressive face?

"Do you want anything else before I go?"

You,she wished she could say.I want you to say I'll also be the ONLY woman in your life.

But how could she when she was terrified of how he would answer her?

"I'm on your side, Summerine."

"I want to believe that," she whispered.

"But you don't."

"I u-used to," she said jerkily, "b-but——"

"That asshole you're in love with fed you lies about me?"

"I..." Summerine's fists clenched against her lap. "I r-really didn't cheat on you——"

Ryu's expression turned brooding. "I guess we're on the same boat again. Because I also want to believe you...but I don't."

Reward

SUMMERINE WOKE UP THE next morning and was greeted by the unexpected sight of her husband still in bed...watching her.

"Oh...hi..."

His gorgeous face softened. "Ohayo."

She should probably tell him that wasn't what she said, but...how could she when it had earned her the most dazzling smile, and...oh.

He had leaned close to cover her mouth with the sweetest kiss, and when he pulled away, all she could do was stare at him.

"That's how you should greet me every morning from now on."

Every...morning?

He then pressed a hand on her forehead. "Your fever's broken."

"I feel better," she admitted.

"But you still need to take it easy in the next couple of days," he cautioned.

Was he saying he wanted her to skip school?

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"I have classes——"

"I have work as well, but I'm not at the office, am I?"

Did that mean——

"How does having me as your personal nurse for the day sound?"

"V-Very good?"

Ryu's gaze gleamed. "I appreciate your honesty. And such straightforwardness shall be rewarded, don't you think?"

Yes, she did think so...until she realized that the reward her husband had in mind was carrying her out of bed so he could help her change.

"I c-can manage——"

"I know you can."

Oh bleep, he was purring again.

"But this is all part of my job being your personal nurse."

And that was how Summerine found herself standing naked in front of Ryu while he remained fully clothed.

It was both agonizing and thrilling to feel Ryu's gaze on her as he slipped the dress over her head. His hands accidentally grazed her breasts, and Summerine's breath caught.

Stay calm, stay calm, stay calm.

He slowly pulled her dress down before turning her around, and it was then she saw the truth in his gaze.

"Y-You——"

"Couldn't resist teasing my wife?" A wicked smile played over his lips. "Guilty as charged."

Ryu then carried her to the dining room, with the table set up for two, and wow. This was not her first time having breakfast with Ryu, but this was definitely the first time he had Chef Milo prepare kaiseki, a traditional Japanese multi-course meal that she immediately fell in love with.

The incredibly tender slices of grilled fish tasted even more delightful when paired with the dipping sauce and sticky Japanese rice. Also to die for were the fluffy scrambled eggs and the crisp salted sheets of nori. The mild but tasty miso soup and the pickled vegetables that added just the right touch of sourness to the entire meal.

Everything was perfect save for...that.

"Open your mouth, wife."

While she absolutely loved having him call her that, what he was asking for was too much, and Summerine stubbornly shook her head.

"If you finish your natto, I'll give you another reward. And it's one I've never given anyone before."

Ryu already had her at 'reward', and her husband chuckled at the way Summerine had opened her mouth before he even finished speaking. But as soon as she saw the amount of natto he expected her to eat—

I can't.

Summerine squeezed her eyes shut in order to pretend she didn't know what was coming and simply swallowed everything in one go.

"It wasn't that bad, was it?"

Summerine's eyes opened at his words, and the rare sight of her husband grinning just had her heart swooning.

Oh, Ryu.

She would willingly go on an all-natto diet every day if it meant always seeing him have fun like this—

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Her husband's lips tightened, and Summerine's smile faded. "What's wrong?"

Ryu scooped her off her seat instead of answering.

"This is all your fault."

"W-What did I——"

"You were looking at me like you wanted to have me all to yourself."

Because I do!

"But you shouldn't have done it."

And now he thinks he has a slut for a wife, she realized with shame.

"Because now you only have yourself to blame."

What did he mean——oh!

Ryu had taken her to his en-suite, and of course it was impossible not to remember the one and only last time she had been here.

It was their wedding night, and she had accidentally seen him...oh...my...gosh.

Ryu had set her on her feet, and all she could do was swallow hard as he got the Jacuzzi in his en-suite working in seconds.

This...was...his...reward?

Her husband turned to face her again. "Yes, wife."

Oh no.

It always meant trouble when he was purring his words out.

"This is your next reward."

She could feel herself getting wetter and wetter between her legs as he closed the distance between them, and a whimper escaped her as he came so, so close...that the erect tips of her breasts actually brushed the muscular hardness of her husband's chest.

"Have I turned you on, Summerine?"

Her face turned red at his knowing tone, and Ryu's lips curved.

"We've barely even started, wife."

She was miserably aware of that, too.

He then cupped her chin, and as her gaze lifted to his, Summerine was expecting to see him gazing at her teasingly.

But his eyes were serious instead, and her heart ached for some reason.

"I enjoy having you in my life, Summerine. And that's why I need you to fall in love with me."

Why?

She wished she had the courage to ask it.

Why is it so important to have me as your wife when you already have someone else?

"At least promise me you'll try."

No.

I won't.

I can't.

But instead she heard herself say shakily, "I promise."

Relief flashed in his dark gaze, and the sight made her want to cry.

Oh no.

(Oh no, indeed.)

I really am in love with him, aren't I?

(Not) Yours

"WHY ARE YOU LOOKING at me like that?" Ryu asked quietly.

If only she could ask him the same thing.

"Speak to me."

Even though she had no plans at all to say a word, the moment his hand cupped her cheek, it was as if his touch had unlocked something inside of her, and Summerine heard herself ask, "W-What about you? Are you cheating on me?"

"No."

His voice was fierce, his answer immediate——

Oh, Ryu.

And for some reason, she believed him.

"I'm not cheating on you."

The sob that slipped past her lips had Ryu stiffening, and then she was throwing herself in his arms.

"Make me yours, husband——"

A shudder rocked his body, and then he was sweeping her up in his arms.

"This isn't how it's supposed to go down," he gritted out.

"I don't care," Summerine whispered. "I just want to be yours——"

His mouth slammed down on hers, and it was the beginning of the end.

His lips nibbled hers.

His tongue slid past her lips.

And then he was tasting her like she had always dreamed of, and oh, when he started sucking on her tongue...

I love you, Ryu.

I love you.

I love you.

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She wanted so badly to cry the words out, but something still held her back, and all she could do was wrap her arms more tightly around his neck. Her tongue darted shyly inside his mouth, and his powerful body jerked against hers when she started sucking on his.

"Summerine, dammit..."

His voice was rough with desire as he bit her name out, and the mere sound had her moaning as her breasts felt more swollen than ever.

"P-Please..."

He carried her into the Jacuzzi, and it was the most decadent sensation to feel bubbly hot water brush against her body even when they were still fully clothed.

Oh, Ryu.

All she could do was writhe with need as her husband did the work for both of them. It had only taken a few moments to have both of them naked, and while seeing their clothes float around the water made for another decadent sight—

Aaaah.

She forgot everything else as soon as he drew her to the other side of the Jacuzzi, where they could both stand in waist-deep water. Ryu then pulled her close, and a whimper slipped past her lips when she was finally able to feel his rock-hard body against hers without any barriers.

Oh, finally.

He placed her hands on his chest, and she shyly took him up on his silent exploration to explore the incredible expanse of his chest.

He was smooth and so, so hard all over, and she was stunned but also thrilled at the way his nipples immediately pebbled under her touch.

To make Ryu react in such a way had her head reeling, and Summerine suddenly couldn't resist the urge to explore lower and lower...

Until her hands were past his flatboard abs...

And his taut belly...

And then finally, oh finally...

Summerine heard her husband suck his breath as her hands shyly brushed against his groin.

"You..."

He suddenly had her trapped against the tiled walls of the Jacuzzi, her hands behind her back.

"Tell me the truth," Ryu grated out. "Is it your first time to touch a man's cock?"

"Y-Yes!"

"And have you ever tasted one?"

Her eyes widened, but this didn't make his handsome face soften.

"Answer me, wife."

"I n-never——"

"But do you want to?"

Her throat tightened.

"Do you want to taste mine, Summerine?"

It was that tone again.

A tone that only a master would use for his willing slave, andooooh——

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"Yes," she choked out. "I w-want to taste it."

Dark eyes glittered down at her. "So do I, Summerine. I want to feed your mouth with my cock. I want to feel you choking on the size of it. Feel you struggling to swallow everything as I shoot my cum down your throat."

Her head swam at the pictures his words painted, and she was barely aware of the wetness trickling down her inner thighs.

"And one day, you'll do all those things. For me."

Yes, oh yes.

"But for now..."

She only realized what he had planned to do when he had her suddenly lying flat on her back on the wooden deck, her legs dangling over the edge, and Ryu was still in the Jacuzzi as he inhaled the scent of her womanhood before nuzzling her wet folds with his mouth.

Aaaaaah.

Embarrassment swallowed her alive even as pleasure had her writhing even more uncontrollably. She gripped his hair and tried yanking his head away, but this only made him chuckle against her throbbing flesh.

"R-Ryu!"

She ended up crying his name out as he suddenly thrust his tongue inside of her.

It took only several deep strokes for her body to start convulsing, and it was while pleasure was still rocking her body that Summerine vaguely felt him moving up and...aaaaah.

Her husband had entered her with one smooth, deep thrust, his engorged length claiming her virginity with a flash of pain that had her gasping and buckling.

I'm...his.

It was Summerine's last semi-coherent thought before passion completely took over, and the way her husband plunged inside of her again and again had her clinging helplessly to his massive shoulders.

He was pounding into her harder and faster with every thrust.

Just so much harder and faster that Summerine felt as if he was about to rip her apart in the most exquisite way possible.

"R-Ryu..."

His mouth then latched to her breast, and an incoherent cry rose out of her throat as Ryu began to suckle her nipple while relentlessly driving his length in and out of her.

Something inside of Summerine started to tighten, and she knew it was the same for him, too, when his thrusts became wilder and rougher until...finally, oh, finally.

Her body arched helplessly against his as they came at the same time, his seed flooding her womanhood, and all she could do was sob his name out.

Ryu.

Ryu.

Ryu.

She was only starting to float back into reality when she heard a splash of water. Ryu was back in the Jacuzzi, and then he was pulling her down with him, and...aaaah.

She could only hold on to the edges of the wooden deck as her husband entered her from behind. It felt as if he was able to thrust deeper into her with this new position, and every plunging stroke had her crying his name out.

Ryu.

Ryu.

Ryu.

Her belly started to tighten in pleasure, but a part of her wanted it to last.

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Please, please, please.

But when her husband reached around her body to start playing with her clit, and the flicks of his finger were timed perfectly with his pounding thrusts—

Aaaaaaaah.

Summerine was back in bed when she woke. She stirred to her side when she heard the door of the en-suite open. It was her husband, already fully dressed, and he was on the phone.

"Hello, darling."

Her eyes squeezed shut.

"I'll be there as soon as I can."

And stayed shut even as she felt her husband press his lips to her forehead before leaving.

Why wasn't she enough for him?

The Other Man

SUMMERINE WAITED UNTIL she heard her husband driving away before jumping out of bed. This act alone had her swaying and feeling woozy, but Summerine forced herself to push through with her plans.

Leaving one's husband while still recovering from the flu was obviously not the wisest thing to do, but neither could she imagine herself staying a second longer. She just couldn't bear the idea of having to share him. And so the sooner she was out of his life, the better.

(You can get yourself killed for this, you know.)

I know.

But you also know if I don't leave, this marriage will kill me—

(Aren't you being dramatic?)

—one betrayal at a time.

So either help me or go away.

Summerine no longer heard back from her Inner Troll after that, and she supposed that was her answer right there.

She switched her phone off before using one of the secret doors to get all the way to the back of the house, and...

Oh.

Okay.

Wow.

Escaping her gilded prison of mirrors turned out to be a lot easier than she imagined. All fourteen of her bodyguards were nowhere to be found as Summerine made her

escape. The perimeter walls were a good ten feet in height, but thankfully, she knew how her husband's mind worked by now, and so she slowly ran her hands over the rough surface, one concrete block at a time until...aha!

Something vibrated under her hand as a hidden panel revealed itself. A scan of her fingerprints was all it took to unlock yet another secret door, and just like that, she was out of her husband's home...and on her way to freedom.

(So why have you started to cry?)

Something got in my eye, okay.

It's not too late to turn back.

It was too late the moment he called another woman his darling.

Summerine was too busy crying and mentally arguing with Inner Troll that she had already walked over a mile by the time she realized someone was following her.

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Oh God.

Prayers had always been more of an idea she was only familiar with, having grown up with a set of parents who believed in playing it "safe" by offering to every god in every religion.

But even as a child, Summerine had always thought there was something wrong with her parents' examples. And in her heart of hearts, she always had this secret conviction that there was only one God—

And You're there.

Right?

Because I have no one else to turn to.

So, please.

Please be there.

Summerine could barely hear her thoughts over the pounding of her heart. The best and worst thing about Evergreen, Texas was how spaced apart all of the ranches were. It was a place where one could enjoy privacy in ample ways...or feel helpless because of its isolated location.

Like now.

Their closest neighbor was miles away, and the farther she got away from Kagami, the darker and scarier everything seemed to be. The only shortcut she knew was through the cornfields, but since she had also watched her fair share of horror movies—

Oh God, please help me.

Summerine heard something - someone? -scurry, but because she also seemed to have the worst night to make her escape, there wasn't even the thinnest sliver of moonlight to help her see. Even with her eyes having adjusted to the near-complete darkness, it was still impossible to make out anything.

Sticking to the highway was the quickest way to find someone to hitch a ride with. But it also left her exposed if someone was following her.

And meant her harm.

I know you're there, God.

But I also know it's not just you.

Summerine had always had this suspicion that Ryu's "darling" also operated on the wrong side of the law.

For all she knew, that woman might even be why Ryu had started a life of crime in the first place...and the reason Summerine couldn't shake off the feeling she was being stalked right this very moment.

Please, God.

Help me.

Please.

She broke into a run as soon as she finished praying.

Losing herself in the cornfields was her only chance of surviving.

And so she ran and ran and ran.

Save me, God.

Please.

Save me.

Because she could hear it now.

Footsteps running alongside her.

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And the taunting sound made her bite back a sob.

Because didn't that mean the stalker could've attacked her long ago?

God, please.

The stalker was obviously having fun playing with her.

But she also knew that could only last for so long, and—NO!

Summerine felt herself start to fall as something furry but unseen darted through her legs, and her stomach turned in fear at the sound of someone laughing in the dark.

A man.

Her stalker was a man.

And she could feel him coming closer and closer.

THUD!

Summerine let out a scream as a black SUV came out of nowhere, and the next thing she knew, a pair of powerful headlights showed a man's body literally flying in the air before landing on the ground in a bone-snapping sound.

Oh God.

She only managed to turn away before strong hands were already gripping her shoulders and forcibly turning her around.

NO, NO, NO!

Summerine struggled wildly, thrashing, kicking, and screaming—

"It's me," a familiar voice gritted out. "You're safe now, it's me."

Her head jerked up, and a sob crawled out of her throat as her eyes collided with her husband's taut dark gaze.

"R-Ryu?"

He cupped her face, and his hands were icy cold against her skin.

"Are you alright?" Ryu demanded.

"I...I...How—"

It was the last thing she managed to mumble before everything went black.

The Other Man, Pt. 2

SUMMERINE WAS ALREADY in the hospital when she woke, and seated next to her bed was her husband.

"You're awake."

Ryu almost sounded like he was worried about her. And he probably was, since he was rather nice, for a criminal.

"H-How..."

Everything started coming back the moment she started to talk, and her voice faltered as memory after terrifying memory razed her mind.

Oh God.

She wasn't even aware of whispering the words out loud, wasn't even aware that she had already started crying until she felt the bed dip under her husband's weight, and he was wiping her tears away.

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"It's alright. You're safe now. He's never going to hurt you again."

"W-Who is he?"

"You don't have to know——"

"I want to know." Because otherwise, her mind would only imagine the worst.

"It's your school doctor," her husband revealed with visible reluctance.

"Doctor Burns?"

She had barely exchanged more than ten words with the older man, and he didn't even look capable of hurting a fly. Why would Doctor Burns want to cause trouble in her marriage?

She turned to Ryu in bewilderment, and her husband read the questions in her mind perfectly.

"The bastard fancied himself in love with you. Decided to cause trouble without getting involved. His plan probably involved offering you comfort in the guise of counseling."

It could've worked, Summerine thought uneasily, except for the part where the doctor had assumed she'd fall in love with him.

"We've been trying to track him since he sent that text. Burns had a stint as an army

doctor, and unfortunately enough, it allowed him to pick up a couple of useful tricks for hiding himself online. He knew the exact moment we were on to him, and he baited us into raiding his apartment in hopes of having an easier time entering our home——"

"Only to realize he has nothing to worry about since I was already outside it," Summerine concluded miserably.

"Your wedding ring comes with a tracker. It's how I found you in time——"

Oh, thank God.

"And realized that my wife was planning to run away from me."

"I...I..."

"If this is about me accusing you of cheating on me," her husband said tautly, "I'm...sorry. I'm afraid the thought of you being with another man made me extremely...unreasonable."

If she was still the old Summerine, she would have let the lie stick.

But because the minutes she had spent running away from Burns were eternally imprinted on her mind, and she had made promises to God that she intended to keep for the rest of her life——

Summerine slowly shook her head. "It wasn't that."

Her husband whitened. "Then why?"

"Because I know you love someone else."

Ryu jerked at her words. "I'm not——"

"Please don't lie," she said unevenly. "Because it's just making me hurt more." She saw her husband flinch upon hearing this. He was acting like her pain was his pain, but how could she believe that?

"Summerine——"

Hearing her name on his lips was agony, and she could no longer bear being this close to him.

"I'm g-grateful that you s-saved me, but I c-can't..."

Ryu was suddenly gripping her shoulders, and she tried to struggle free, but it was impossible.

"Ih-heardy-you with my own ears, Ryu. I h-heard you c-call her your d-darling——"

"Stop."

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It was that tone again.

And the sound still had her obeying even when he had become a master that caused her nothing but pain.

"I'm sorry I didn't realize you were entertaining such thoughts——"

"I heard you!"

"But I promise you——"

Was he seriously pulling his phone out?

"It's not what you think."

And actually making a call now of all times?

Summerine couldn't remember feeling this...this betrayed.

And outraged.

And——

"Hello, darling," she then heard Ryu say.

FURIOUS!

Before Summerine realized what she was doing, she had already grabbed the phone out of her husband's hand, and—

"Well, hello there."

—found herself staring at another man?

"Are you Mrs. Ryu Harcourt by any chance?"

"Yes, she is—" Ryu grabbed his phone back. "But I'll introduce you later. Hanging up now."

Her husband looked at her then, and she still didn't know what to think. "W-Why—"

"Morrison and I are colleagues at work. 'Hello, darling' is a code we use to let each other know it's safe for us to talk."

Oh.

"Will you believe me now when I tell you I've never cheated on you—"

"I do," she whispered.

"And never will—"

Summerine could only nod this time as tears started to roll down her cheeks.

"Because I'm in love with you?"

Because her heart somehow already knew what he was about to say, and Summerine threw herself in his arms as soon as she heard him say the words.

"I l-love you, Ryu," she choked out. "I love you so, so much——"

Ryu's head started to lower.

"And I p-promise I will never j-judge——"

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But the kiss she expected never came with her husband now looking at her in bemusement.

"What are you talking about?"

Summerine reminded herself about all the promises she made to God when she thought she was about to die...before blurting out the truth.

"I k-know who you really are. B-Because of the room——"

"What room?"

"The one with all the guns——"

"Ah." A grimace crossed her husband's handsome features. "That's the only room you're not supposed to have access to. But you've probably found your way to it on the one day we were conducting a maintenance check on the system."

"I didn't mean to spy on you——"

"I know." Ryu's voice was gentle. "But...what I don't get is why you'd think there's something to judge."

"But the guns..."

"And that's it?"

"And the fake IDs," she added reluctantly. "And the credit cards——"

"That weren't fake," he pointed out.

They weren't?

"But I suppose you didn't take the time to check," he guessed.

Summerine couldn't help feeling a little defensive. "They wereso many!"

"And of course havingso manycredit cards can't be explained by my ten-figure net worth."

Sarcasm, even when utteredpolitely,was still sarcasm, and it stung enough to have Summerine wincing.

"So, let me see if I get this straight. Aside from havingso manycredit cards——"

"And the fake IDs and guns," she reminded him. "If you add them all up together, surely you can see why that would make me think——"

"——I'm working for the FBI?" Ryu drawled.

"——you're a mob boss?" she finished at the same time.

Oh.

Wait.

Did he just say what?

Epilogue

THE WEEKS THAT FOLLOWED her discharge had Summerine feeling very much like a bride getting to know her groom for the first time. It was like having a new beginning for her marriage, now that there were no secrets between them.

She had always thought him the serious type, but Ryu turned out to be more wicked in the way he would do everything possible to make her blush. He would accept every interview request just to have the pleasure of seeing Summerine squirm or wince as he lazily dished out one outrageous compliment after another.

My wife is the hottest woman alive in my eyes, he had once told a reporter.

And of course, the reporter had no choice but to accept this, never mind if it was plain as daylight to anyone that the only time someone as ordinary as Summerine could be considered 'hot' was when she was running a fever.

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Another thing Summerine hadn't expected was when her husband admitted to paying off her parents to keep their distance if they only meant to cause trouble.

I didn't stop them from visiting you. I only said it wouldn't be a good idea if they were to make you cry.

While it was both painful and sad to realize that her parents had chosen to stay away because of this, Summerine was not without hope. The way God had saved her had changed her life completely. She might not be able to change her parents' hearts, but God could if He so willed.

And so she would keep praying until that day happened.

But in the meantime...

Summerine was so, so excited that her husband finally agreed to let her try his favorite sport. She had even bought herself the latest set of workout gear, with all the fancy features any athlete could hope for. A perfect fit for maximum airflow and flexibility. Shoes that increased one's agility and speed. And she even bought herself a smartwatch to track—

Oh.

Her husband had finally joined her in his personal gym in the basement, but...why was he only dressed in a robe?

"Are you going to change here?" Summerine asked.

"I don't need anything else."

Understanding dawned as she watched him start to disrobe. "So you're into sumo——"

Ryu's robe fell to the floor, and her jaw also fell.

Because as far as she knew, sumo wrestlers did not wrestle naked.

"Do you remember what I told you about my favorite sport?"

"Um..."

It was so hard to think as she watched Ryu walk towards her like some tall and powerful warrior who also happened to be completely unashamed by the virile evidence of his arousal.

"I told you it wasn't the kind of sport that you played."

She did vaguely remember such words, now that he mentioned it.

"And I wasn't lying——"

Summerine's mouth went dry when he finally reached her.

"Because you were still a virgin at that time."

Oh. My. Gosh.

By the time she realized what his favorite "sport" was, he already had her down on her knees, and his fingers were threading gently through his hair before slowly guiding her head closer and closer and closer...

Aaaaah.

The End